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## The Reversal of the Passfield White Paper, 1930-31: A Reassessment

When the Balfour Declaration of 1917 pledged British support for the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine, the British Empire began an official relationship with Zionism, but one that became more challenging as the decades progressed. Britain officially secured the internationally sanctioned mandate for Palestine in 1922, but two periods of riots and violence had already led to limits on the British-Zionist relationship. The Churchill White Paper of 1922 sought to both affirm and limit the Jewish national home, assuring detractors that the Jews were in Palestine ‘of right and not on the sufferance’ but that their immigration was tied to Palestine’s economic capacity.<sup>1</sup> This action coincided with a period of calm in Palestine for most of the 1920s, during which British politicians were able to ignore lingering Jewish-Arab tensions, leading to rapid reductions in costly troops and police, based on the mistaken belief that British policy had ameliorated the conflict. However, a new quarrel over Jerusalem’s ‘Wailing Wall’ in 1928 roused the passions of all Palestine’s communities, leading to violence on a horrific scale in August 1929.<sup>2</sup> The British Government responded with two commissions of inquiry that directly resulted in the Passfield White Paper of 1930.

This document represented the first attempt to limit the Jewish national home, not indefinitely, but to an extent designed to prevent rioting in the future. Nevertheless, this new policy was reversed. The *volte-face* was articulated in a letter sent from Prime Minister James Ramsay MacDonald to the President of the World Zionist Organisation, Chaim Weizmann, in February 1931, giving rise to the belief

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<sup>1</sup> Cmd 1700, 1922, *Palestine. Correspondence with the Palestine Arab Delegation and the Zionist Organisation*.

<sup>2</sup> Cmd 3530, 1930, *Report of the Commission on the Palestine Disturbances of August 1929*, 155.

that Zionist lobbying had successfully harnessed the British Empire. This is a rather simplistic assessment, however, and attempting to find the reasons behind Britain's policy change requires looking at the Labour Government's political pressure points in 1930-31 in more depth. Rather than a Palestine policy based on a narrow interpretation of the role played by Zionist lobbying, this analysis reveals a Palestine policy based primarily on the need to maintain a modicum of unity within government and across parties, which was threatened by the strategic pro-Zionist activism of opposition leaders. This episode represented a stillborn moment in the development of British policy in Palestine, but it has a continued relevance for both Israeli and Palestinian historical narratives.

Scholars often assume that the activities of Zionist lobbyists, such as Chaim Weizmann, successfully placed the British government under immense pressure to recant the Passfield policy. Shlomo Ben-Ami, for example, notes that, 'before it could even come into effect, Passfield's White Paper was for all practical purposes abrogated by Chaim Weizmann's skilful lobbying'; similarly, Benny Morris writes, 'By early 1931 well-applied Zionist pressure in the press and lobbying by Weizmann in London bore fruit'.<sup>3</sup> The same reasoning is found in Yehoshua Porath's work, citing 'Zionist pressure' in the reversal of policy, in Ilan Pappé's *A History of Modern Palestine*, Neil Caplan's *Contested Histories* and many others.<sup>4</sup> Such 'explanations' of British behaviour are almost entirely without citation, however, and when they are

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<sup>3</sup> S. Ben-Ami, *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace: The Israeli-Arab Tragedy* (Oxford 2008) 9; B. Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict* (New York 1999), 117.

<sup>4</sup> Y. Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian Arab National Movement: 1929-1939* (London 1977), 136; I. Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine* (Cambridge 2006) 93; N. Caplan, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: Contested Histories* (Chichester 2010), 80; W. Matthews, *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation: Arab Nationalists and Popular Politics in Mandate Palestine* (London 2006), 83; T. Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs Under the Mandate* (New York 2000). R. El-Eini, *Mandated Landscape: British Imperial Rule in Palestine, 1929-1948* (London 2006); J. Renton, 'Flawed Foundations: The Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate', *Britain, Palestine and Empire: The Mandate Years* (Farnham 2010).

referenced, the evidence is tenuous. Susan Pederson, for example, notes that ‘Historians usually and rightly credit Weizmann’s remonstrance and effective lobbying for that *volte-face*’, and cites Norman Rose’s *The Gentile Zionists* to illustrate this point.<sup>5</sup> This analysis, however, cannot be found in Rose’s book; instead, he offers an account that posits the importance of Parliamentary political infighting and at no point credits Weizmann with a victory.

Rather than Rose’s work, which is based heavily on research at the Weizmann Archives, this myth is actually most likely the result of Chaim Weizmann’s own account in his autobiography, *Trial and Error*. In what Christopher Sykes agrees is a highly biased account of the negotiations with British politicians, Weizmann paints the British attitude as incompetent and coloured by antisemitism.<sup>6</sup> Accounts of the white paper’s reversal are rarely granted more than a sentence or two in histories of the mandate or Anglo-Zionist relations, and there seems to have been a widespread acceptance of these largely unfounded assumptions.<sup>7</sup>

A small number of scholars have attempted to provide a more nuanced explanation, but the analyses remain unsatisfactory. One argument points to a Whitechapel by-election as the reason for Labour’s apparent collapse under pressure.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, however, the by-election took place on 3 December 1930 – two months before MacDonald wrote to Weizmann. James Hall – the Labour candidate in Whitechapel – won having secured the support of the British chapter of international Zionist organisation, Poalei Zion, despite the Liberal candidate actually being Jewish

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<sup>5</sup> S. Pederson, ‘The Impact of league Oversight on British Policy in Palestine’, *Britain, Palestine and Empire: The Mandate Years*, ed. Rory Miller (Farnham 2010), 52.

<sup>6</sup> C. Sykes, *Crossroads to Israel* (Bloomington 1973), 116; C. Weizmann, *Trial and Error: The Autobiography of Chaim Weizmann* (London 1949).

<sup>7</sup> Notable exceptions include C. Marlowe, *Seat of Pilate: An Account of the Palestine Mandate* (London 1959), 124; N. Rose, *The Gentile Zionists* (London 1973), Chapter 1; G. Kramer, *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel* (Princeton 2008), 235.

<sup>8</sup> G. Sheffer, ‘British Colonial Policy-Making Towards Palestine (1929-1939)’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 14, 3 (October 1978), 307-322, 311.

and every other candidate denouncing the white paper.<sup>9</sup> It is incongruous, therefore, to explain the government's reversal decision by implying that it was a preventative measure directed towards this by-election.

Another opinion about this incident points to a letter to *The Times* written by pre-eminent lawyers Hailsham and Simon. Taking what amounted to a pro-Zionist stance, the letter called for an opinion from The Hague on whether limiting Jewish immigration violated the mandate for Palestine.<sup>10</sup> This argument cites Prime Minister MacDonald's desire to avoid scrutiny as the reason for reversing Passfield's white paper.<sup>11</sup> The problem with this reasoning, however, is that Hailsham and Simon specifically focused on criticising paragraphs 27 and 28 of the white paper, neither of which featured in MacDonald's letter to Weizmann. If Hailsham and Simon's criticisms were crucial, then why were their arguments absent from the final reversal? On its own, the Hailsham and Simon letter provides only a half-formed explanation. The letter was important, but for a different reason. Hailsham and Simon were pre-eminent lawyers, but more importantly, were both former and future cabinet ministers from the Conservative and Liberal parties respectively, and their letter to *The Times* is evidence of the political infighting highlighted by Rose, Gabriel Sheffer and later by Gudrun Kramer, but as yet not investigated further.<sup>12</sup> Instead, by addressing why the Passfield White Paper was originally published, as well as problems created by disunity within the Labour Party and the need for cross-party support on India policy, it is possible to reveal the conditions that made James Ramsay MacDonald's government so susceptible to pressure on the Palestine issue.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Gorny, *The British Labour Movement and Zionism 1917-1948* (London 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Lord Hailsham and John Simon, 4 November 1930, 'British Policy in Palestine', *The Times*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> G. Sheffer, 'Intentions and Results of British Policy in Palestine: Passfield's White Paper', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 9, 1 (January 1973), 43-60.

<sup>12</sup> Rose, *The Gentile Zionists*, Chapter 1; Kramer, *A History of Palestine*, 235.

Considering the outrage that followed its publication, it is pertinent to ask why the government even approved the Passfield White Paper. In the immediate aftermath of violence in Palestine, two commissions of inquiry investigated the root of the problem. The first was led by the distinguished jurist, Sir Walter Shaw and the second was composed of only one man, Sir John Hope-Simpson. Just as earlier commissions investigating violence had concluded in the early 1920s, all but one member of Shaw's team identified that 'the difficulties inherent in the Balfour Declaration and in the Mandate for Palestine are factors of supreme importance in the consideration of the Palestine problem'.<sup>13</sup> Palestine had suffered severe economic problems during the 1920s, and despite provisions of the Churchill White Paper of 1922 having stipulated that immigration should be based on economic capacity, this had largely been ignored. The Shaw Commission found that both immigration and Jewish land purchase meant 'a landless and discontented class is being created'. This was a dangerous development, and the commission recommended a radical overhaul of agriculture and expansion of cultivation to solve the problem as well as a further scientific enquiry to determine the details.<sup>14</sup> As Sir John Hope-Simpson was considered experienced in ethnic conflicts, having acted as the League of Nations' Vice-Chairman of the Refugee Settlement Commission in Greece, and was neither demonstrably pro-Arab nor pro-Zionist, he was entrusted with the task.<sup>15</sup>

After two months of researching scientific reports written during the mandate, as well as conducting interviews and travelling the country, Hope-Simpson concluded that 'there is at the present time and with the present methods of Arab cultivation no margin of land available for agricultural settlement by new immigrants, with the

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<sup>13</sup> WO 32/9614, 1920, Jerusalem riots: Courts of Enquiry, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA); Cmd 1540, 1921, *Palestine Disturbances in May, 1921. Reports of the Commission Of Inquiry with Correspondence Relating Thereto*; Cmd 3530, 150-163.

<sup>14</sup> Cmd 3530, 161-166.

<sup>15</sup> CAB 24/212, 9 May 1930, 'Palestine: Statement with Regard to British Policy', TNA, 4.

exception of such undeveloped land as the Jewish Agencies hold in reserve'. Although Hope-Simpson noted that Arab unemployment and landlessness were ascribed 'probably quite erroneously, to Jewish competition', Palestine's economic woes required 'drastic action'. Fundamentally, he believed that '[w]ithout development, there is not room for a single additional settler'.<sup>16</sup> In light of these two commission reports, the Cabinet Committee on Palestine, led by Colonial Secretary Lord Passfield, was faced with the necessity of action. The problem with extensive development, however, was the economy.

The American stock-market crash of 1929 was developing into an international financial crisis that heralded stagnation and unemployment for British voters, and development in Palestine necessitated either a guaranteed loan or grant-in-aid from the Colonial Office.<sup>17</sup> When the Cabinet Committee on Palestine submitted their first report on 15 September 1930, it included a detailed plan for the development that Hope-Simpson had advised was urgently necessary. However, the cost of Hope-Simpson's plan was unknown until a further financial committee delivered the blow: 'Sir John Hope-Simpson's scheme involved the expenditure of some £6,000,000, spread over ten years, the interest on which would have to be guaranteed by the Exchequer. This would probably necessitate a loan spread over twenty years, the service of which would require £400,000 a year. This sum, however, did not include the capital cost of the land'. These amounts were much higher than anything the cabinet committee had considered and they were advised to re-assess the situation.<sup>18</sup> The committee prepared a new report and concluded that, 'in present

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<sup>16</sup> Cmd 3686, 1930, *Report on Immigration, Land Settlement and Development or Hope Simpson Report*, 141, 135, 153.

<sup>17</sup> PREM 1/102, 10 August 1930, Cabinet Committee on Policy in Palestine 'Memorandum on the Financial Situation of Palestine by Sir John Campbell, Financial Advisor to the Secretary of State', TNA, 29.

<sup>18</sup> CAB 23/65, 19 September 1930, Cabinet Minutes, TNA, 2-3.

circumstances a proposal to spend many millions on land settlement of Jews and Arabs in Palestine would, meet with serious opposition in Parliament and the country'.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, the committee's report returned to the cabinet on 24 September with new suggestions. They decided that the Jews should be allowed, at their own expense, to continue developing the land they already owned and that this should suffice to permit Jewish settlement for the following five years. Jewish immigration would be restricted to numbers suitable for those reserve lands or could be absorbed comfortably into the industrial population.<sup>20</sup> The outcome was a compromise of some very limited development and compensation, as well as limits on the rate of expansion of the Jewish national home. The Colonial Secretary warned Weizmann, giving him an overview of the Hope-Simpson report and the policy under consideration, and Passfield believed that Weizmann 'took it very well indeed' while stressing that 'there should be no numerical limitation on the ultimate number of Jews'.<sup>21</sup> The draft policy was published as the Passfield White Paper on 21 October 1930 and prompted condemnation from both the Conservative and Liberal Party leaders.<sup>22</sup>

By February 1931, the white paper had been undermined so severely as to constitute reversal. This was done in the letter from MacDonald to Weizmann offering an 'authoritative interpretation' of the Passfield White Paper and British policy in Palestine. Far from limiting land purchase or Jewish immigration, the MacDonald Letter stressed that centralised control over land purchase would be 'regulatory and not prohibitive' and that 'His Majesty's Government did not imply a prohibition of acquisition of additional land by Jews', which had been the central

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<sup>19</sup> CAB 24/215, September 1930, 'Cabinet Committee on Policy in Palestine Second Report', TNA, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 3; CAB 23/65, 24 September 1930, Cabinet Minutes, TNA, 10.

<sup>21</sup> PREM 1/102, 3 October 1930, Passfield to Ramsay MacDonald, TNA.

<sup>22</sup> CO 733/183/2, October 1930, Discussion of Amendments, TNA.



theme of Passfield's policy. Regarding immigration, the letter assured that 'His Majesty's government did not prescribe and do not contemplate any stoppage or prohibition of Jewish immigration in any of its categories'<sup>23</sup>, which again, ran counter to both the Shaw and Hope-Simpson commission reports as well as the deliberations of the Cabinet Committee on Palestine and the approval they received in cabinet. As the final text of the letter 'had been agreed upon between representatives of the Jewish Agency and [another] Committee appointed by the Cabinet on the 6th November, 1930'<sup>24</sup>, Zionist leaders appeared to have exerted a great deal of influence on the decision, contributing to the belief in the power of lobbying.

However, although Weizmann did orchestrate a campaign by writing letters to prominent newspapers as well as the Permanent Mandates Commission and encouraging his supporters and friends – of which he had many among the British elite – to do the same, these efforts always constituted more of a public show of protest than an exercise in secret diplomacy. Negotiations with Zionists from November 1930 until January 1931 began with the Foreign Office trying to convince Weizmann and his colleagues that the white paper was a sound, legal policy and ended with a *volte-face*. Understanding why this occurred requires a more nuanced and cumulative analysis of the state of imperial policy and Parliamentary politics in 1930-31.

As a minority administration, the second Labour government was intrinsically fragile. The Passfield White Paper attracted criticism from many groups and personages, but discord it created within the Labour Party itself was more worrying. As Labour's traditional stance towards Zionism had been staunchly supportive, James Ramsay

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<sup>23</sup> James Ramsay MacDonald, 14 February 1931, 'The Palestine White Paper An Interpretation, Prime Minister's Letter', *The Times*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> CAB 23/66, 4 February 1931, Cabinet Minutes, TNA, 10.

MacDonald's government faced the threat of a backbench rebellion, highlighting a fundamental division between the principles of Labour politicians outside of the government and those in cabinet advocating a ruthlessly pragmatic policy for Palestine. This disunity, combined with Labour's numerical weakness in the House of Commons and its need for cross-party support on foreign policy, especially with regard to India, made the government susceptible to pressure on the Zionism issue.

Ideologically, Labour had been officially pro-Zionist since shortly before the Balfour Declaration, having approved the War Aims Memorandum, which called for a Jewish return to Palestine. It was written chiefly by Sydney Webb, who became Lord Passfield, and reflected the Party's general support for self-determination among national ethnic groups – including in India.<sup>25</sup> By 1930, the strongest Labour supporters of Zionism were Joseph Kenworthy in the House of Commons and Josiah Wedgewood in the Lords.<sup>26</sup>

Kenworthy, for example, wrote to Weizmann immediately after the white paper's publication, assuring him he had the support of many non-Jewish MPs and would correct this 'blunder'.<sup>27</sup> This preference, however, was buoyed by Kenworthy's general commitment to pragmatism in ethnic conflicts. He did not consider British conciliations in the face of violence to be good policy unless they actually solved the problem at hand, and his 1931 book called *India: A Warning* cautioned fellow politicians that succumbing to the violence of one particular ethnic group would not solve fundamental obstacles to peace and stability.<sup>28</sup> In the House of Lords, Wedgewood had promoted Zionism since the 1920s, joining with both James Ramsay

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<sup>25</sup> Labour Party and Trades Union Congress, *Memorandum on War Aims* (London 1917); P. Keleman, 'Zionism and the British Labour Party: 1917-39', *Social History*, 21, 1 (January 1996), 71-87, 71-72; Rose, *The Gentile Zionists*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> P. Hanna, *British Policy in Palestine* (Washington 1942), 98.

<sup>27</sup> Kenworthy to Weizmann, 21 October 1930, *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: Volume XV Series A October 1930-June 1931* (New Brunswick 1978), 2 (hereafter *LPCW15*).

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Kenworthy, *India: A Warning* (London: E. Matthews & Marrot, 1931).

MacDonald and future Chancellor Philip Snowden in organising the Palestine Mandate Society, a pro-Zionist lobby group. MacDonald had even visited Palestine in 1922 and subsequently argued that the Arab claim to self-determination was invalid because ‘Palestine and the Jews can never be separated’.<sup>29</sup> MacDonald, Passfield and Snowden, therefore, had all promoted the Zionist movement with their likeminded colleagues before being faced with the Shaw and Hope-Simpson commissions and the obligation to avert further crisis in Palestine, the solution to which appeared to defy some of their Party’s core values.

As well as unstable levels of endorsement within his own party, MacDonald also had to contend with the inherent difficulties of minority governance; he relied on varying degrees of cross-party support for foreign policy initiatives to prevent polarised Parliamentary debates that risked splitting his own party.<sup>30</sup> In March 1930, for example, MacDonald wrote to Passfield to arrange an early discussion on the necessity of a new Palestine policy, but stressing that ‘it could only be [...] with the general support of all parties in the House of Commons’.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the prime minister’s son, Malcolm MacDonald, noted how it was always ‘important that the Liberals at any rate should support their proposals’.<sup>32</sup> This was because Labour had inherited an Empire in disarray, and with the coming of a global depression, stronger dominions and colonial nationalisms, as well as the rise of the United States as a world power, imperial policy had become an exercise in calculated control through concession and compromise – a balance between firmness and conciliation – and these issues had the power to arouse great Parliamentary passions within as well as

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<sup>29</sup> J. Ramsay MacDonald, *A Socialist in Palestine* (London 1922), 18.

<sup>30</sup> Gorny, *The British Labour Movement and Zionism*, 51.

<sup>31</sup> CO 733/183/1, 19 March 1930, JRM to Passfield, TNA.

<sup>32</sup> MAC 8/12/2, undated, MacDonald Notes, University of Durham Special Collections (hereafter UDSC).

across parties.<sup>33</sup> Conservative Chairman Leopold Amery called this problem Labour's 'paralysing ineptitude'.<sup>34</sup> In this atmosphere, however, all party heads recognised the importance of some degree of cooperation in private negotiations.<sup>35</sup> As such, MacDonald had conferred with both Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin and Liberal *de facto* leader David Lloyd George in March 1930 – specifically with regard to the Shaw Commission – to ask for 'the guidance of your views on what should be done now'.<sup>36</sup> This was necessary because the consequences of trying to move ahead without cross-party support had proved nearly disastrous for India policy the previous year, in circumstances highly similar to the debate that followed the Passfield White Paper.

When Labour came to power in 1929, the existing legislation on India's internal government was the Montagu-Chelmsford Act of 1921, which was due for review. To this end, a Statutory Commission chaired by Liberal MP Sir John Simon had been formed to recommend the next stages of constitutional development; in Parliament, passionate opinions regarding the degree and pace of Indian self-rule cut across parties. India had growing provincial nationalisms, and Lord Irwin, a Conservative peer cooperating with the government, suggested giving Indian politicians a veneer of responsibility and proto-independence to produce a sedative effect. Before the Simon Commission could present its report, however, the government issued the Irwin Declaration based on this principle on 31 Oct 1929. Whereas both Conservative and Liberal leaders had agreed to this cross-party initiative, the problem was with the declaration itself. Liberal Lord Reading, former

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<sup>33</sup> P. Williamson, *National Crises and National Government* (Cambridge 1992), 79.

<sup>34</sup> AMEL 1/5/3, undated, draft article for *Home and Empire*, The Churchill Archives Centre (hereafter CAC).

<sup>35</sup> Williamson, *National Crises and National Government*, 79.

<sup>36</sup> PREM 1/102, 19 March 1930, Ramsay MacDonald to Baldwin, Lloyd George, Passfield and Henderson, TNA.

Viceroy to India, criticised the wording as dangerously ambiguous, sacrificing long-term stability for short-term pacification. Reading's stature commanded authority, and his objections allowed Lloyd George and other Liberals to refuse consent for the declaration, stiffening the instinctive opposition of Peel, Austen Chamberlain, Churchill and other Conservatives whom the Party leader, Stanley Baldwin, was unable to restrain once it became known that the declaration had not received Simon Commission approval. The result was a major hardening against minority-Labour's India policy among both Conservatives and Liberals.<sup>37</sup> The cabinet issued a communiqué specifically stating what Irwin's ambiguity had attempted to conceal, that the declaration involved no change of policy, which sparked violent outrage in India and left bitter divisions between parties in Westminster.<sup>38</sup>

In the year following the Irwin Declaration, however, there was a subtle and tenuous shift within Parliament back towards a more bipartisan line – Labour stood firmly behind the declaration, and despite a flurry of Liberal uncertainty, was ultimately supported by Lloyd George with Conservatives acting as a check on hurried constitutional development.<sup>39</sup> India remained a crucial issue, however, and the cabinet was meeting twice a day in the summer of 1930 to discuss it. The situation remained tenuous for MacDonald, and Beatrice Webb (Lady Passfield) recorded in her diary during this time that 'the Labour Government is on the rocks and may any day be wrecked'.<sup>40</sup> The uneasy consensus on India policy built up the previous year was the product of luck rather than adroit political manoeuvring on the part of the

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<sup>37</sup> Williamson, *National Crises and National Government*, 84-87, 90; S. Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: The Crisis of 1929-1931* (London 1988), 109.

<sup>38</sup> MacDonald Diary, 10 November 1929, cited in Williamson, *National Crises and National Government*, 87-90.

<sup>39</sup> Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, 114.

<sup>40</sup> PASSFIELD/1/2/9, 9 July 1930, Diary of Beatrice Webb, Archives of the London School of Economics (hereafter LSE).

Labour government, which was fast approaching the first in a series of India Round Table Conferences in November 1930.

The period 1929-30 marked one of the few occasions when India policy coloured all of British politics.<sup>41</sup> Problems in India gradually became more pressing during 1930, and India became intricately intertwined with the issue of Party leadership battles.<sup>42</sup> There was a general problem of '[d]iscontent and disillusionment' along the front benches, which made the atmosphere even more volatile, and Labour leaders were 'strangled by the multitudinous and complicated issues raised in government departments; and by the alarming gravity of two major problems – India's upheaval and the continuous and increasing unemployment', the latter of which was, of course, connected to India due to Britain's crucial trading relationship with the Raj.<sup>43</sup> This first Round Table Conference, therefore, was a bold procedural initiative designed to help MacDonald's Labour government achieve one of their policy goals (granting India dominion status) despite the tense political environment. The conference was intended to create a direct dialogue between Indian and British politicians, representing all parties, thereby bypassing the India Office and minimising the risk of widespread revolt in the House of Commons.<sup>44</sup> This was supposed to be a landmark moment, and it was directly threatened by the fallout from Passfield's white paper.

In addition, the conflict in Palestine bore some of the hallmarks British politicians associated with India, such as ethnic conflict and 'natives' agitating for

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<sup>41</sup> S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Irwin 1926-1931* (Oxford 1957), 113; G. Peele, 'Revolt Over India' in Gillian Peele and Chris Cook eds, *The Politics of Reappraisal, 1918-1939*, 114-145. (London 1975), 116.

<sup>42</sup> Peele, 'Revolt Over India', 126.

<sup>43</sup> LSE/PASSFIELD/1/2/9, 1 July 1930, Diary of Beatrice Webb.

<sup>44</sup> N. Owen, *The British Left and India: Metropolitan Anti-Imperialism, 1885-1947*. (Oxford 2007), 175; M. Ahmed, *The British Labour Party and the Indian Independence Movement 1917-1939*. (London 1987), 118.

political rights: Leopold Amery remarked how the violence in Palestine would be ‘familiar to most Indian administrators’.<sup>45</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to consider that the two issues held equal weight in British politics: ‘little Palestine with its troubles – insignificant to the rest of the world’, Beatrice Webb wrote, ‘is likely to be forgotten in concern over the revolution which some say is going on in India’.<sup>46</sup> Palestine was, therefore, paradoxically, both important – because it threatened to disrupt Labour’s cross-party support for the India Round Table conference – and insignificant – as India was the chief and all-consuming concern. This India context meant that the government – and especially Passfield – were initially anxious to avoid any appearance of capitulation to outside pressure.

At first, the government’s attitude of forbearance meant ignoring both the borderline anti-Semitic complaints of Palestine’s High Commissioner Sir John Chancellor as well as ‘the persistent bombardment by the Jews, in personal intercourse, in formal interviews, in newspaper propaganda, in insidious threats of ulterior action’. Passfield seemed to take great pride in resisting Zionist requests to lift a ban on immigration under the Labour schedule imposed by Chancellor with cabinet approval.<sup>47</sup> Crucially, this attitude of steadfastness against the ‘Jewish hurricane’, as Passfield referred to it, endured during the new policy’s preparation in cabinet committees in the summer of 1930 and obviously did not prevent its publication on 21 October. Weizmann, for example, threatened to resign on 13 October but the white paper was still published two weeks later. In contrast, the political danger following publication of the Passfield White Paper emanated chiefly from within the British political establishment, and stemmed from many criticisms levelled at the white paper

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<sup>45</sup> AMEL 1/5/12, 1 of 2, undated, draft article, CAC.

<sup>46</sup> PASSFIELD/1/2/9, 30 October 1930, Diary of Beatrice Webb, LSE.

<sup>47</sup> PREM 1/102, 10 August 1930, Cabinet Committee on Policy in Palestine ‘Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies’, TNA, 4, 7.

that represented more political strategy than principled objection.<sup>48</sup> Accusations directed by Liberal and Conservative leaders against the Labour government were not overly concerned with the text of the white paper or the policy it contained. They did, however, prolong the debate that was potentially divisive to Labour's own ranks, which fundamentally altered the government's priorities when negotiations with Zionists began in earnest following the Parliamentary debate on Palestine in mid-November.

During the short time period in which the Passfield White Paper came under fire in Westminster, all three parties: Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberals were suffering through leadership problems. As the Palestine issue was applicable to many Conservative MPs' ideas regarding India, it was a subject on which Baldwin could score easy points among his colleagues. David Lloyd George was leader of the Liberals in all but name and faced an increasingly marginalised position, a potential rival in Sir John Simon and the need to defend his own prime ministerial record. Both Baldwin – through Leopold Amery – and David Lloyd George had previous ties to Zionism and prior relationships with Chaim Weizmann, but the Passfield White Paper was also an easy and expedient target for both opposition leaders in a campaign waged through their letters to *The Times* and speeches during the subsequent Parliamentary debate on Palestine.

It is important to note that Stanley Baldwin had barely survived the Irwin Declaration debacle by appeasing his vocal critics within the Conservative Party. When Baldwin spoke in Parliament on the India issue, for example, 'there had been no word of approval from his own colleagues and as soon as Lloyd George got up

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<sup>48</sup> Rose, *The Gentile Zionists*, 16.



Winston and Worthington-Evans on each side of him leant forward and punctuated every sentence with emphatic ‘hear hears!’” The Conservative leader was in danger of having to resign because ‘[i]f the matter had gone to division half his colleagues would have voted against him’.<sup>49</sup> A moderate facing ‘diehard’ backbench opinion, especially with regard to India, the Conservative leader could ill afford to support any government policy that appeared to acquiesce in the face of demands even remotely similar to those of the India Congress. In the case of Palestine, Leopold Amery noted how Arabs were comparable to Indians – not because British politicians viewed Jews as non-indigenous, but because they were Caucasian, European, and therefore perceived very differently.<sup>50</sup> Approaching the India Round Table in 1930, Baldwin deliberately retreated from frontline politics and declined to serve on Britain’s delegation to the conference.<sup>51</sup> He wrote to Lord Irwin on 16 October to say that in preparing for the conference, he ‘kept off, partly to keep L.I.G. off and partly because the political situation is far too tricky to allow me to be immersed in a Conference when every crook in the country is out for my scalp’.<sup>52</sup>

In this environment, Leopold Amery, the Conservative Party Chairman, former Colonial Secretary and known Zionist sympathiser, strove to keep Baldwin in his leadership position.<sup>53</sup> Amery was indeed a Zionist, but he was first and foremost a

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<sup>49</sup> Lytton to Irwin, 9-10 November 1929, Halifax Indian Papers Mss Eur c. 152/18/309, in P.

Williamson, ed., *Baldwin Papers: A Conservative Statesman, 1908-1947* (Cambridge 2004), 224.

<sup>50</sup> AMEL 1/5/12, 1 of 2, undated, draft article, CAC; House of Commons Debates, 17 November 1930, vol 245. This is evident from the type of language used to describe both communities in the House of Commons during this time period. Jews were bringing ‘civilisation’ and a ‘new light, new spirit’ to an area that had been ‘derelict for a millennium’, thereby embodying European colonial values. Arabs of Palestine, however, even when described fondly or in an attempt at neutrality, were ‘squalid’ and ‘miserable’, committing ‘wild’, ‘barbarous’ and ‘savage’ acts, meaning the British might ‘be obliged to place the Arabs of Palestine on a lower scale of civilisation than their natural qualities really entitle them to.’

<sup>51</sup> Baldwin to Joan Davidson, 2 November 1930, Lady Davidson papers partly in *Davidson Memoirs*, 354, M&B 578-9, in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 243.

<sup>52</sup> Halifax Indian Papers, Mss Eur c. 152/19/147, in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 239.

<sup>53</sup> LG/F/39/2/28, Blankenberg to Amery, 1 November 1920, Parliamentary Archives (hereafter PA); Lady Davidson Papers, partly in *Davidson Memoirs*, Baldwin to Davidson, 13 November 1930, in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 246.

British imperialist. This is evident in an article he wrote for *The Pioneer* in December 1929: ‘The terms of the Balfour Declaration make it plain that the creation of the Jewish National Home did not imply the setting up of a Jewish nationalist state’, he wrote, ‘[e]qually it left no room, in Palestine at least, for the assertion of that type of nationalism by the Arabs’.<sup>54</sup> Even with Amery’s confidence, which was not unconditional and wavered substantially the following year, Baldwin felt the opposition of diehards as well as members of the Conservative Party who still favoured coalition with Lloyd George and had been marginalised by his removal in 1922, such as Austen Chamberlain. The policy that joined many along the Liberal and Conservative benches was free trade within the Empire, which was the particular cause of press barons, Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Rothermere, who formed the United Empire Party to split the Conservative vote and pressure against India reform.<sup>55</sup>

This alignment of interests aroused suspicions of collaboration between the three men. Baldwin, for example, asked his shadow cabinet, ‘[w]hat is your reading of the Beaverbrook-Rothermere game? And under which thimble is the pea, or in other words L.I.G.’?<sup>56</sup> In a moment of frustration in dealing with this situation, Amery suggested the Baldwin-loyalists should sign a letter to their leader saying ‘All your old colleagues conscious of each other’s senility desire to tell you that not one of them has any objection to any of the others being bumped off [...]’.<sup>57</sup> While assassinating the diehard Conservatives was not an option, their various outrages were at least relatively predictable. Baldwin and Amery were determined to beat these internal

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<sup>54</sup> AMEL 1/5/46, 1 of 2, December 1929, ‘The Future in Palestine’ *The Pioneer*, CAC, 5-6.

<sup>55</sup> S. Ball, ‘The Legacy of Coalition: Fear and Loathing in Conservative Politics, 1922–1931’ *Contemporary British History*, 25, 1 (March 2011), 65-82, 77; Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 225-232.

<sup>56</sup> Amery Diaries, II, 59-60 (30 January 1930) in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 226.

<sup>57</sup> Baldwin to Davidson, 13 November 1930, Lady Davidson Papers, partly in *Davidson Memoirs*, 355, in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 246.

opponents at their own game: 'I am fighting with beasts at Ephesus', Baldwin wrote, 'and I hope to see their teeth drawn and their claws broken before the battle is over!'<sup>58</sup>

These fears and frustrations aligned with Amery's long-term involvement with Zionism and culminated in a letter to *The Times* protesting against the Passfield White Paper. The letter was constructed in conjunction with Arthur Balfour's niece and Zionist campaigner Baffy Dugdale. Amery recounted how 'Mrs Dugdale [...] came in very much concerned about the Palestine White Paper' and believed that the Conservative Party should 'dissociate themselves as promptly as possible from the Government in this matter'. Amery agreed and ushered Mrs Dugdale in to see Stanley Baldwin, inviting her to begin 'drafting something before she came back and lunched with us'. Mrs Dugdale then took Baldwin's 'general instructions as to the points to be brought out in a letter', which she drafted and then Amery revised and amended the document with Baldwin and Austen Chamberlain.<sup>59</sup> Weizmann credited his colleague Namier with inspiring Mrs Dugdale, but it was Leopold Amery who organised the Conservative opposition to the white paper.<sup>60</sup>

Amery even recruited Austen Chamberlain for this purpose. As well as a known Zionist sympathiser, Chamberlain had opposed Baldwin over the Irwin Declaration and had no confidence in him as a leader, noting how, 'to recall an old cartoon of "Punch", a manifesto in his hands becomes "a wet blanket"'. Chamberlain, however, did not relish the thought of a party run by the press barons and opposed attempts to force Baldwin's resignation on the grounds that it 'would be hailed as a

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<sup>58</sup> Baldwin to Sir John Simon, 19 February 1930, Simon Papers 62/228, in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 228.

<sup>59</sup> J. Barnes and D. Nicholson, eds., *The Empire at Bay: The Leo Amery Diaries 1929-1945* (London 1988), 85.

<sup>60</sup> Weizmann to Amery, 23 October 1930, *LPCW15*, 1; Weizmann to Warburg, 24 October 1930, *LPCW15*, 8.

triumph for themselves by Rothermere and Beaverbrook'.<sup>61</sup> Published on the 23 October 1930, their collaborative letter accused the Labour government of abandoning the Jewish national home policy, stating, 'they have laid down a policy of so definitely negative a character that it appears to us to conflict [...] with the whole spirit of the Balfour Declaration and of the statements made by successive Governments in the last 12 years'. The effect of this policy, the letter charged, was 'to create a feeling of distrust in that British good faith which is the most precious asset of our foreign Imperial policy'.<sup>62</sup> The letter was relatively brief, and as such made no reference to the Shaw or Hope-Simpson Commissions nor to any of the specific arguments utilised by the white paper.

Baldwin was not a passive observer in this political infighting, but he found it very draining and sympathised with James Ramsay MacDonald's similar situation, seeing the Prime Minister as 'a good man and true, fighting for his life'.<sup>63</sup> The same was not true for Baldwin's opinions of David Lloyd George: 'no constitution can stand public life today when you get near seventy', Baldwin wrote, 'unless you are made like L.I.G. with no bowels, no principles, no heart and no friends'.<sup>64</sup> The Liberal leader was, however, also under pressure from his own party. While Amery did not necessarily want a Parliamentary debate on the Palestine white paper, 'fearing that it would show divisions in our own ranks', it was David Lloyd George who recognised the opportunity, pushed for a date and organised a debate.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> AC39/2/1-56, 9 October 1930, Austen Chamberlain to Neville Chamberlain, Cadbury Research Library Special Collections (hereafter CRL).

<sup>62</sup> Stanley Baldwin, Austen Chamberlain and Leopold Amery, 23 October 1930, 'British Policy In Palestine, The White Paper, Conservative Leaders' Comments', *The Times*, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Gwynne to Louis Grieg, 11 November 1930, Gwyne Papers 20, in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 245.

<sup>64</sup> Baldwin to Salisbury, 19 Jan 1931, Hatfield House Archives 4M/139/45, in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 250.

<sup>65</sup> Barnes and Nicholson, *The Empire at Bay*, 88.

By 1930, Lloyd George's unofficial position as leader of the Liberal Party was also tenuous. He had been a divisive figure for Liberal politics since 1916 when he ousted Prime Minister Asquith and then fronted a majority Conservative government against the wishes of many within his party. In July 1930, Lloyd George had led a vote against the government and lost simply because many Liberal MPs defied the whip and sided against their leader.<sup>66</sup> Lloyd George was also bitterly frustrated with the Liberal Party's marginalised position and support for a Socialist government that was failing to fulfil its promise of radical reform. As MacDonald refused to supply an arrangement that gave the dwindling Liberal Party any lifeline, Lloyd George attempted to exploit Conservative dissatisfaction with Baldwin to win back some of his former coalitionists and attract younger, more progressive Tories into his sphere.<sup>67</sup> Baldwin recognised the tactic, noting that, 'The Goat has finally failed to get any real arrangements with Labour and rumour has it he is going to make another attempt on us'.<sup>68</sup>

Lloyd George was also close to a leadership challenge from Sir John Simon, of the Simon Commission in India.<sup>69</sup> As head of a majority Conservative coalition between 1918 and 1922, Lloyd George had lent broad support to Zionism, and whenever the subject surfaced in debate he advocated the movement with a vociferous sincerity that also served to defend his own prime ministerial tenure. This meant that the letter Simon wrote to *The Times* with Conservative politician Lord Hailsham was also a tacit challenge to the Liberal leader's position. The letter purported to compare provisions of the white paper to the terms of the mandate and accused the government

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<sup>66</sup> PASSFIELD/1/2/9, 11 July 1930, Diary of Beatrice Webb, LSE.

<sup>67</sup> J. Campbell, *Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness, 1922-1931* (Aldershot 1993), 253.

<sup>68</sup> Baldwin to Davidson and Joan Davidson, 27 November 1930, Lady Davidson Papers partly in *Davidson Memoirs*, 355-6, M&B 579, in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 246-7.

<sup>69</sup> Chamberlain to Hilda, 14 Feb 1931, R. Self, ed., *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters Volume 3: The Heir Apparent, 1928-33* (Aldershot 2000), 237.

of flouting Britain's international obligations as a member and trustee of the League of Nations. Furthermore, it called for 'the Council of the League of Nations to obtain from The Hague Court an advisory opinion on the questions involved'.<sup>70</sup> Like with the Irwin Declaration, however, such criticism of the Passfield White Paper was not concerned with the actual policy, but instead, '[a]lleged ambiguities and unfriendliness', how it looked and sounded.<sup>71</sup> This was the political context in which the Passfield White Paper was published on 21 October 1930 and then debated in the House of Commons on 17 November.

Comprised of targeted attacks from Liberal and Conservative MPs designed to embarrass the government rather than clarify points of policy, the debate was centred on issues like antisemitism and breaches of faith. The government's response, however, had been prepared in advance by the Colonial Office and so was directed against the substance of these complaints rather than their political motivations. This led to a situation in which the substance of the white paper was immaterial to its survival. Speaking first, Lloyd George led the attack, accusing the government of antisemitism and hypocrisy, and he attempted to drive a wedge between MacDonald and the Colonial Secretary by questioning 'whether the Prime Minister himself was fully consulted before this document was issued'. MacDonald never answered these comments, but of course he had approved the policy.<sup>72</sup> Palestine High Commissioner Sir John Chancellor's comments on this debate were as blunt as ever: 'L.G.'s speech was typical – all sentiment and hot air'.<sup>73</sup>

In response to these attacks, it was Colonial Office Under-Secretary Shields' task to speak in defence of the government, which in principle was not difficult.

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<sup>70</sup> Lord Hailsham and John Simon, 4 November 1930, 'British Policy in Palestine', *The Times*, 15.

<sup>71</sup> CO 733/183/3, October–November 1930, 'Notes on Jewish Criticisms of White Paper', TNA.

<sup>72</sup> House of Commons Debates, 17 November 1930, vol 245, cols 80–81; PREM 1/102, 3 October 1930, Passfield to Ramsay MacDonald, TNA.

<sup>73</sup> FO 800/282, 3 December 1930, Hope-Simpson to Campbell, TNA.

Shiels highlighted how '[t]here seems to have been some obvious misunderstanding'<sup>74</sup>, but he was merely being polite. The protests from Liberals and Conservatives in *The Times* had already been identified as both fallacious and underhanded. Chancellor openly expressed this opinion, writing to O.G.R. Williams directly at the Colonial Office to say he was 'greatly concerned about the letter which Baldwin, Chamberlain and Amery have written to the *Times*. If all parties would accept H.M.G.'s statement of policy, there would be some prospect of future peace in Palestine. If they are going to make it a party question, Palestine will become a running sore and a potential danger to the safety of the Empire, like Ireland'.<sup>75</sup> In correspondence with Shuckburgh in the Colonial Office's Middle East Department, Chancellor added, 'I share your view as to the mischievous character of the Baldwin-Chamberlain-Amery letter. No doubt it was inspired by Amery'.<sup>76</sup> After both letters had been published, the Colonial Office prepared a defence of the white paper, and their memoranda formed the basis of Shiels' defence.

At the Colonial Office, O.G.R. Williams was responsible for the full rebuttal to Hailsham and Simon's letter. Williams noted that the letter purported to compare the white paper with the official mandate, but mentioned only the mandate's preamble, Article II and Article VI, omitting any reference to protecting non-Jewish populations. As well as misleadingly paraphrasing the white paper, Hailsham and Simon also ignored the findings of Hope-Simpson and created an impression of the new policy that was 'quite untrue'. Williams did highlight, however, how Hailsham and Simon's reference to The Hague was purely political since 'it would be so framed as to be exceedingly unfavourable and humiliating to His Majesty's Government [...] owing to the peculiar composition of The Hague Court'. This was the only part of the

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<sup>74</sup> House of Commons Debates, 17 November 1930, vol 245, cols 92–93.

<sup>75</sup> CO 733/183/3, 22 October 1930, Chancellor to Williams, TNA.

<sup>76</sup> PREM 1/103, 16 November 1930, Chancellor to Shuckburgh, TNA.

letter that was troubling, not because the issue really would necessitate referral to The Hague, but because dealing with it exposed the government's financial motivations for cutting Jewish immigration rather than investing in development.<sup>77</sup>

Otherwise, arguments opposing the white paper prompted only incredulity at the Colonial Office. Passfield himself wrote a rebuttal to *The Times*, stating '[i]t is reassuring to find from their letter published in your columns [...] that such high authorities as Lord Hailsham and Sir John Simon do not indicate anything in the Palestine White Paper inconsistent with the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate save in so far as they seek to draw from language used in paragraphs 15, 19 to 23 and 28 three inferences, not one of which is justified'. These inferences, Passfield added, 'are made plausible only by an inaccurate representation of the contents of the paragraphs referred to, not one of which is quoted verbatim'.<sup>78</sup> The usually competitive Foreign and Colonial Offices were also in complete agreement.

Foreign Secretary Henderson had received the full text of Zionist objections to the white paper a week before the debate (via the Prime Minister's pro-Zionist son, Malcolm MacDonald). The eastern dept of the Foreign Office had then prepared a full rebuttal that raised almost identical points to the defence written by the Colonial Office without conferring between the two. Both ministries agreed that there was 'no intention to crystallise the status quo'.<sup>79</sup> High Commissioner Chancellor echoed the absurdity of this situation, noting that '[t]he local Jewish criticisms of the statement of policy, for the most part, condemn it for things that it does not contain'. In Parliament, Shiels reiterated polite versions of these sentiments and stressed his earlier opinion

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<sup>77</sup> CO 733/182/8, 4 November 1930, Memorandum by Williams, TNA; CO 733/183/3, 21 November 1930, 'Memorandum on the Policy of His Majesty's Government as Set out in the October White Paper', TNA.

<sup>78</sup> CO 733/182/8, 5 November 1930, Draft Letter, Passfield to *The Times*, TNA.

<sup>79</sup> FO 800/282, 14 November 1930, 'Notes on Jewish statement communicated by Mr Malcolm Macdonald', TNA.



that the 'White Paper makes no change whatever in the interpretation of the Mandate', but rather, '[w]hat it does is to emphasize the necessity for a more exact application of the absorptive capacity principle'.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, Shields argued, '[i]t is obvious that the suggestion that this Government is seeking to crystallise the Jewish National Home in its present position is without a shadow of foundation'. The bureaucracy was united; differences of opinion on the Passfield White Paper were between politicians.

During the Parliamentary debate, it was Leopold Amery who brought up the subject of India. Amery declared that Palestine's 1929 riots were 'an old-fashioned religious outbreak of the type with which the Indian administration is only too familiar'. He was trying to draw a comparison between 'giving in' to Arabs in Palestine and acquiescing to Indian self-rule, hinting at the Irwin Declaration. 'This is not the first White Paper of this kind that has appeared', Amery declared, and pointed to unrest throughout the world 'because of the White Papers which are poured out from the Colonial Office and which we are afterwards told do not mean what they appear to say'. Amery's speech was aimed at the diehard, anti-Baldwin group within the Conservative Party. This is why the arguments against the white paper had little bearing on the document's actual contents.

As expected, condemnation and support was not unanimous among any party. Colonel Charles Howard-Bury, for example, was Conservative MP for Chelmsford and believed the government had 'acted very courageously and impartially in producing that White Paper'. Another Conservative MP, Sir George Jones, admonished the character of the debate, stating 'that it would be a calamity if the Palestinian question were involved in party politics in this country'. The Liberal MP Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris defied his own leader by highlighting how 'it would be a

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<sup>80</sup> CO 733/183/3, 22 October 1930, Chancellor to Williams, TNA; CO 733/183/3, October–November 1930, 'Notes on Jewish Criticisms of White Paper', TNA.

moment of very grave importance in the history of this country if it were recognised that international events of this kind are to be part of the ordinary battle of party conflict in this country'. Labour MP Frederick Cocks also called attention to the political machinations underway, saying Lloyd George 'had one eye on the Mount of Olives and the other on a part of the East End of London where a by-election is about to take place and where there is a population of very hard-working and able Zionists'. Other Labour members lent support to the Opposition. Daniel Hopkin, for example, raised the spectre of anti-Semitism.<sup>81</sup> Although both Liberal and Conservative parties were relatively untroubled by backbench dissent in this debate, Labour could not afford such breaking of ranks. Amery understood this and gave his assessment of the debate as 'From White Paper to white sheet'.<sup>82</sup> Beatrice Webb recognised, however, that 'all three parties are in a devil of a mess'.<sup>83</sup>

Although Anglo-Zionist discussions regarding the Passfield White Paper began the day of this Parliamentary debate and were intended as a means to clarify the new Palestine policy, these negotiations only gradually witnessed the policy's reversal. Rather than Chaim Weizmann's skilful lobbying, these talks reveal a Labour government emphatically defending its new policy before wearily tossing it aside as the issue threatened to bleed into another busy and stressful calendar year.

When the white paper was published on 21 October 1930, the criticism it attracted seemed to impact Prime Minister MacDonald's thinking relatively quickly. On 6 November, the cabinet decided to create a new sub-committee for Palestine policy. The new committee was tasked with legal clarification of Palestine policy in cooperation with an authority such as the Lord Advocate, and it would also 'get in touch with the representatives of the Zionists in the most politic and tactful manner

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<sup>81</sup> House of Commons Debates, 17 November 1930, vol 245, cols 96–187.

<sup>82</sup> Barnes and Nicholson, *The Empire at Bay*, 90.

<sup>83</sup> PASSFIELD/1/2/9, 11 July 1930, Diary of Beatrice Webb, LSE.

possible in the circumstances and should make recommendations as to the attitude to be taken up by the Government in view of the reception of the recently issued white paper'.<sup>84</sup> MacDonald then met with Weizmann the same day, when he reportedly told the Zionist leader, 'There is no white paper'.<sup>85</sup> This unequivocal comment was most likely an off-the-record exclamation and there is little other indication that the decision to reverse the white paper had been made by 6 November. Bringing the Zionists into discussions, however, was likely influenced by the Hailsham and Simon letter since the sub-committee was tasked with ensuring the new policy was legal and sound. This is why the cabinet wanted 'clarification' conducted in conjunction with the Lord Advocate.<sup>86</sup> Gestation of the reversal idea had only just begun, and the government would have been unlikely to proceed with a difficult Commons debate and an impassioned defence of the white paper had the decision to reverse it already been made. Rather, the main issue remained correcting any appearance that Labour intended to undermine international law.<sup>87</sup>

Henderson's notes for the negotiations demonstrate his confidence in the government's stance. 'If 'the position' of the Arabs is 'positively changed for the worse'', Henderson wrote, 'the Government must take steps to put things right'. Zionist criticisms, he decided, 'lose a good deal of their force because they assume intentions on the part of His Majesty's Government which are contrary to the facts'. The Foreign Secretary was also annoyed by Zionist memoranda' prolific citations of Hailsham and Simon's letter to *The Times* without a single reference to Lord Passfield's rebuttal of 5 November and frequent misleading quotations. An oft-repeated accusation that the white paper blamed Arab unemployment solely on Jewish

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<sup>84</sup> CAB 23/65, 6 November 1930, Cabinet Minutes, TNA.

<sup>85</sup> Rose, *The Gentile Zionists*, 20.

<sup>86</sup> Weizmann to Amery, 13 November 1930, *LPCW15*, 38.

<sup>87</sup> CAB 23/65, 6 November 1930, Cabinet Minutes, TNA.

immigration, for example, was one instance 'of incomplete quotation and misinterpretation of the white paper'. As it was not the British government's priority to establish a Jewish state, it was, Henderson believed, its duty to issue the white paper. It is important to preface these opinions, however, with the knowledge that Henderson entered into these Anglo-Zionist talks with an eye on the League of Nations where his top priority throughout the autumn of 1930 was disarmament. The Foreign Secretary was wary of Zionism's international activities. 'On the publication of the Shaw Report', he wrote, 'there is reason to suppose that every effort was made by the Jews to influence the Permanent Mandates Commission unfavourably against His Majesty's Government'. Another member of the Foreign Office later scribbled an additional note: 'though it must be admitted that there is no documentary or other proof'.<sup>88</sup>

The Palestine subcommittee first met Zionist representatives on 17 November and the initiation of these talks was announced that day. It was hoped that the beginning of the subcommittee's discussions would provide some inoculation against criticisms anticipated at the debate, but Shiels was unconvinced. 'I am rather doubtful about the electoral help we shall get', he wrote to Henderson, 'as Amery, L.I.G. and Co. are heavily in with Weizmann [...]'.<sup>89</sup> What followed was a series of face-to-face meetings and negotiations via correspondence until late January 1931. Throughout these talks, Chaim Weizmann alternated between confidence in his ability to secure a reversal of the white paper and uncertainty regarding the direction of negotiations. Two days after the debate, for example, Weizmann informed Amery that '[a]lthough the Government is retreating very slowly and with not too much grace, a retreat it is'. However, a few days later Weizmann wrote that, 'I do not know how our negotiations

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<sup>88</sup> FO 800/282, November 1930, Detailed Comments on a Memorandum by Mr. Leonard Stein. 'The Palestine White Paper of October 1930', TNA.

<sup>89</sup> FO 800/282, 15 November 1930, Shiels to Henderson, TNA.

will end. This is no easy matter'. Weizmann received the first draft of what became the MacDonald Letter on 29 November, and he remarked that the 'impression here is unfavourable'.<sup>90</sup>

This first attempt, labelled 'the Henderson letter' at this stage, was very long and essentially constituted the full rebuttals already made by Passfield, Shiels, the Colonial and Foreign Offices. It did contain some of the key reversing phrases found in the final letter, but these were accompanied by extensive contextual caveats. While noting that the Passfield White Paper made land control 'regulatory and not prohibitive' the first draft also went on to say, 'it does involve a power to veto transactions which are inconsistent with the tenor of the general scheme'. As well as assurances there would be no stoppage of immigration in any category, the first draft included sprawling provisos asserting the government's right to restrict immigration in line with economic capacity.<sup>91</sup>

Weizmann considered that Passfield was poisoning the atmosphere against them, believing 'the old man malignantly sabotages everything'.<sup>92</sup> From the Zionist delegation's perspective, the problem was that Henderson and two other committee members had no prior dealings with their cause, creating long, drawn-out meetings in which the intricacies had to be explained and the busy Henderson in particular became very irritable. In contrast, Weizmann wrote, 'Passfield does know the thing, but he is so artful and shifty that you never know when you have got him to agree to something'.<sup>93</sup> Looking at the meeting transcripts and Henderson's notes, however, he was well versed with the problems of Palestine and simply refused to yield on the

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<sup>90</sup> Weizmann to Amery, 19 November 1930, *LPCW15*, 44; Weizmann to Wormser, 21 November 1930, *LPCW15*, 47; Weizmann to Beilinson, 27 November 1930, *LPCW15*, 51-53. Weizmann to Henderson, 1 December 1930, *LPCW15*, 55; Weizmann to Jacobson, 4 December 1930, *LPCW15*, 56

<sup>91</sup> FO 800/282, 29 November 1930, Henderson to Weizmann, TNA.

<sup>92</sup> Weizmann to Sokolow, 7 December 1930, *LPCW15*, 57.

<sup>93</sup> Weizmann to Warburg, 11 December 1930, *LPCW15*, 63-64.

government's right to issue the white paper and his belief that Zionist criticisms were unfounded. Henderson told Weizmann he was being 'supersensitive', and quoted Shields' Parliamentary defence of the white paper during meetings. The Foreign Secretary challenged Weizmann on every point, demonstrating how these talks were originally intended to persuade and intimidate rather than placate Weizmann and his fellow Zionists. '[O]ur whole object', Henderson stated, is 'to clear up matters that are ambiguous, that have been misstated or misunderstood [...] I want you and your colleagues to be quite clear in your mind that the fullest possible opportunity is given to you to state every possible objection your people have to this White Paper. You can expect nothing more'.<sup>94</sup>

By mid-December, Weizmann complained that '[t]he negotiations with the Government drag on rather inconclusively'.<sup>95</sup> A redraft of the Henderson letter returned from a legal committee but included only minor technical changes to language in two paragraphs of a document more than twenty pages long.<sup>96</sup> There was still no agreement by the end of December, but Weizmann met the Prime Minister on Christmas Eve and believed he 'seems really anxious that our negotiations should end in a successful agreement'.<sup>97</sup> This was likely because the Whitechapel By-Election of 3 December showed a significantly reduced Labour majority.

Meanwhile, the Palestine subcommittee was achieving very little, and Henderson was due to leave London for Geneva on 9 January. In preparation for his absence, the Foreign Secretary authorised another redraft of the letter. This was

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<sup>94</sup> FO 800/282, 'Verbatim Notes Taken by Stenographer at 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of Members of the Cabinet with Jewish Representatives held on Tuesday 18 November', TNA.

<sup>95</sup> Weizmann to Bentwich, 17 December 1930, *LPCW15*, 69; Weizmann to Rothschild, 24 December 1930, *LPCW15*, 76.

<sup>96</sup> FO 800/282, 17 December 1930, 'Redraft of December 17 of paragraphs 8 and 9 of Letter Sent by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Dr Weizmann, Dated November 29, Regarding British Policy in Palestine, Embodying Amendments Agreed on by Drafting Committee at Meetings December 11 and by Legal Committee on December 17', TNA.

<sup>97</sup> MAC 9/4/38, 31 Dec 1930, Weizmann to Malcolm MacDonald, UDSC; Weizmann to Bentwich, 17 December 1930, *LPCW15*, 69; Weizmann to Rothschild, 24 December 1930, *LPCW15*, 76.

written by the Lord Advocate and Malcolm MacDonald, both identified by Weizmann as friends of their cause – and finished on 7 January, resulting in a fourth draft of the letter.<sup>98</sup> It was during these January meetings that the final letter took shape by eliminating all of the caveats and provisos concerning Britain's right to limit Jewish immigration and land purchase that Henderson had defended since November. Further changes were agreed via written correspondence on 22 January 1931, but they were superficial – all offending wording had already been removed from the British draft.<sup>99</sup> There was a final meeting between Zionists and the Palestine sub-committee on 30 January and suddenly they had complete agreement. The fifth draft of the letter was finalised during this session and was approved by cabinet on 4 February 1931.<sup>100</sup>

The reversal of the Passfield White Paper did not occur, therefore, until January 1931 and evolved relatively quickly during that month as the Palestine sub-committee, and particularly Henderson, stopped defending the government's original position. This process seems to have constituted a rather hurried attempt to rid the Labour government of a problem leftover from the previous year when other more important issues continued to demand attention. On 23 January, for example, the Prime Minister officially closed the first stage of the India Conference, which was due to continue within a few months. In the House of Commons, the Conservative spokesman made it clear that they intended to preserve cross-party unity on India, not least to avoid creating another dangerously partisan issue arising like the question of Ireland.<sup>101</sup> The implications were simply too important for Britain and the Empire more broadly.

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<sup>98</sup> MAC 9/8/2-9/8/58, 27 April 1931, 'Historical Summary of Discussions Leading up to the Prime Minister's Letter of February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1931, To Dr. Weizmann', UDSC.

<sup>99</sup> MAC 9/5/36, 22 January 1930, 'Proposed Corrections in Mr. Henderson's Draft Letter', UDSC.

<sup>100</sup> Weizmann to Vera Weizmann, 30 January 1930, *LPCW15*, 95

<sup>101</sup> Peele, 'Revolt Over India', 129.

Indeed, Palestine could be tidied away, Beatrice Webb wrote, but ‘[d]uring the next year, whichever party is in power, it is India that will claim attention’.<sup>102</sup> It appears that the weight of holding the Labour Party together on an issue made more divisive by the arguments of Conservative and Liberal politicians, who were partially motivated by preserving their own leadership positions, was simply too tiresome. The minority Labour government found it less aggravating to concede to the terms of a letter drafted and amended by the Prime Minister’s own son and a legal authority in the Lord Advocate than to continue to defend the Passfield White Paper against what both the Foreign Office and Colonial Offices agreed were unfounded accusations. There may have been no official alliance between Chaim Weizmann, Baldwin, Amery and Lloyd George, but the effect on MacDonald and his colleagues was the same.<sup>103</sup> In a bid to maintain Labour unity and avoid derailing India policy, the government most likely found itself resigned to jettisoning the Passfield White Paper.

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<sup>102</sup> PASSFIELD/1/2/9, 14 December 1930, Diary of Beatrice Webb, LSE.

<sup>103</sup> Gwyne Papers 20, Gwynne to Louis Grieg, 11 November 1930, in Williamson, *Baldwin Papers*, 245.